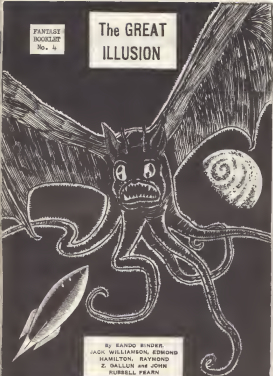


FANTASY  
NOVELIST  
No. 4

# The GREAT ILLUSION



By SANDO BINDER,  
JACK WILLIAMSON, EDMOND  
HAMILTON, RAYMOND  
Z. GALLUN and JOHN  
RUSSELL FEARN

# The GREAT ILLUSION

"The greatest experiment in human history was about to begin!"

Four men stood in the small, lined cabin of the spaceship, their gleaming attention centered on Rensinger's apparatus riveted to the wall. North, tall and solemn, stood with a sneer on his hawklike face. Bradner and Fortney, far younger than the other two, gazed with hypnotic fascination their faces pale with a desperate fear.

Rensinger reached a hand toward the mechanism's only lever. Bradner jerked forward, clutched his arm in panic. Rensinger turned in impatient surprise.

"Wait—just one minute!" pleaded Bradner. "Before we go ahead with this, explain it all again. After all there may be no return and—"

"No return?" repeated Rensinger with emphasis. "Get that North—no return!"

"But—" snapped the physicist. "The whole thing is a farce. There will be no return because there will be no return. Go through that machine, fumble about for 2400 hours, Rensinger, and for their benefit, then it's assured that they gave up reason to be. Well, admit, Rensinger!"

The scientist gasped, turned his face toward them again. From the doorway, astonished North and Bradner, looked to the two young scientists of the great two hours.

So, indeed, suddenly, for this

beginning of Rensinger's experiment

\* \* \* In this story, the first of the five authors, was asked to write the last part of the story; the second author, to write the fourth installment, and so on. John Russell Pearson started (or rather ended) the story, leaving it to be explained a number of months later. Raymond Z. Gallun, who was next, remarked after completing his job, "The back-to-back experiment was pretty badly screwed up before, and I imagine it's worse now!" Next, Edmund Hamilton, said, "I will give a prize of \$1000 to anyone who can tell me what the other two parts of this story are about. And I will give a prize of \$100,000 to anyone who can tell me what my part is about. The thing looks like the surest story in the history of science fiction."

So, then, the first installment—then we go. You remember the classical experiment in perception two years ago which proved that electricity is life, pure and unadulterated. You remember how it was. Making communications with this basic information, we found many things—unbelievable things. For the Blue Boxes who ran this in any experiment with that of which's space, revealed that all human thought is illusion! Every theory and conception ever perceived by the human mind is a delusion!"

Rensinger went on despite another interruption. "But," said North. "For Rensinger, our explanation, by which we—there was about the number of the time between zero and one—there was, indeed, in the

\* Jack Williamson, who followed, briefly converted, "In my opinion, this would be a very interesting story if one knew precisely what it is all about!" Finally, Rensinger, completing (or beginning) the story, remarked, "I've done up best to carry the yarn on, as best as I can, as possible, retaining the example of the others, and the story is done no less than the others in making it seem a little more plausible. I could have made it literary, legible, for the reader to understand, but I think as it stands now it's safe from ever being unravelled." Despite the above comments, we believe the five authors have done a remarkable job. To fully appreciate these difficulties, we suggest you read the story as it was written—backwards. Then, read it in the normal manner, and marvel at its coherence and smoothness.

greater and true mathematics. Then only the senses are so incredibly inaccurate, and cover a truly vast field of perception. With these difficulties—it is no wonder that we cannot realize that there are no such as vacuum, nor anything we think we know of! Yet the Blue Boxes of electricity have shown us that."

"The machine?" insisted Bradley. "That shaft which peeks to three dimensions?"

"That?" spat out North. "A Big Boy! Is he dead in that?"

Rensinger ignored the bitter threat, asked, "Are two years of daily contact with the Blue Boxes really give me a glimpse of the Great Truth? Give me a slight idea of the Great Truth that is behind this great illusion of life space, reveal all the other things, as he

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JACK WILLIAMSON, EDMOND HAMILTON, RAYMOND Z. GALLUN and JOHN RUSSELL PEARSON

think and 'because' I was able, then to build this apparatus. Simply stated it pours its 200,000 volts into what we call a vacuum and ripe it made like a veil, to reveal beyond the ultra-dimensional shaft that leads to—the Real Universe. It's like going through a mirror and finding reality there!"

"So Allow said to the Mechanist. Please sir, can I have a puff on your opinion?" mocked North.

"As for you," said Rensinger coolly, feeling the leaning physicist, "remember five minutes from now that I said your great illusion is like a man who sees double and imagines pink elephants in between."

"One more thing," whispered Bradner. "This shaft to the—the Beyond—it is navigable by a spacecraft, isn't it?"

At the scientist's firm "yes" the two young men looked at each other in evident relief. Rensinger's weak old eyes flared suddenly. "Navigable, yes?" he went on. "But only one way! For when you reach the end, you are again at the beginning, yet it is not circular!"

"And when we reach the end, we are once again at the beginning, and therefore back in the laboratory?" asked Fortney eagerly.

"Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" asked North scornfully. "And where does the rooster come in?"

Rensinger patted the handle of the machine reflectively before answering Fortney. Then he said, apologetically, "I told you from the start there was no return! That and 'because' are human conceptions, like

zero and infinity. There is no end or beginning in this shaft!"

Bradley choked in his breath sharply, while Fortjay grew paler than he was. Korth mocked the whole thing with a nasal chant about the Max with Two Minds, Neither of Which Existed.

"But enough of this chatter," barked Berringer. His thin, sharp face grew livid with a driving purposefulness. "You, Bradley and Fortjay, asked to come along—pledged yourselves, in fact. I told you it was slow minds, but I saw you disbelieved that. You cut aside a chance to regain and become famous, even though that is illusion with all the rest of human endeavor. You elected to plumb with me unknown depths—the real cosmos—and even that is an illusion! Korth is here to observe the Outer phenomena as a learned scientist, and he, too, will perceive that all is illusion!"

"Not to mention the illusion that you have." Korth winked at the two younger men. "I mean the illusion that you did not turn utterly insane two years ago."

Berringer grasped the handle of his machine. "Are we ready?" he barked, and at the same time wrenched over the lever savagely.

With a suddenness that brought a gasp to their lips, the laboratory vanished from beyond their port windows, and was succeeded by an ultimate blackness. Their ship seemed to be in a pool of ink. There was not the faintest ray of light outside the hull, and the darkness seemed to be crawling in, trying to extinguish their overhead light.

But a moment later a faint lightness appeared in the vast distance. It brightened and resolved itself as a glimmering galaxy of blue, with titanic green-glowing wings wide-spread. It seemed to be approaching.

Bradley and Fortjay huddled together, talking softly.

Korth, face relaxed, faced to the side port and tried to plane the subtle curtain beyond. But all he could see was the huge green-winged monstrosity, steadily nearing. "Damn you, Berringer!" he shrieked whirling. "What have you done?"

Perfectly calm, the aged scientist spoke triumphantly. "Just what I said I would. I wrenched the vacuum apart, and we are now falling—or rising, or neither—in the shaft that leads beyond earthly illusion to—more illusion! We have engines, but they are useless—I see the irony of it now. For there are no such things as motion or distance! Relative conceptions—illusions! Do you know what we shall find? Remember Korth, do you?"

Berringer went on as the tall physicist slumped back, eyes wide. "We shall find that the sun is the center of everything, and that it is the only star! We shall see other stars spaced evenly around, but bunched at one end of this nine-dimensional shaft, and they will be illusions. The planets will be missing!"

"But those are silly, meaningless things—unreal hallucinations. The important things we shall see and discover will be the Nine Beings in their natural environment of what we call vacuum. Then the face-voles of the Outer World, whose reactions we call stars. The Outer and Mind which the Nine Beings fear. And finally, the Great All—the reality that will turn illusion before our very eyes!"

Korth and Berringer stared at one another, both aware of a greenish-blue significance behind these paradoxical words.

They did not notice that Bradley and Fortjay were quietly sneaking toward the airlock. In their eyes was a glimmering—a hypnotic determination to escape from this mad ship that was plunging to an alien universe. In their fear-pale faces shone but one thought—"Get out!"

Bradley twisted the control lever for the airlock, jerked open the first door, and duplicated this maneuver at the outer hatch. Strangely, there was no blast of sweeping air as he catapulted himself madly away from the ship. Fortjay followed an instant later.

They had escaped! Let death come, the way they understood death; better that than the insane journey to a world of insanity and illusion!

"It was very dark. There were no stars visible. Fortjay shivered at the cold wind that blew out of the black silence. His hands clutched at the naked, ice-cold rocks. Even as he lay with face pressed against the ledge, his head still ached and spun with an appalling, unendurable vertigo.

There are no stars!

The words hung in his mind, a haunting, hideous stigma. He tried to remember; then the thought came that the memory must be so terrible that it would shatter his sanity.

With vast relief, he sensed another inert body near him. His eyes, becoming adjusted to the strange darkness, could now see the outlines of the desolate rocky terrain, as if by a faint luminescence. He turned toward the groan.

"Bradley!" he muttered. "What happened? Where are we?" He whispered again the sinister and meaningless answer to his questions: "There are no stars!"

Bradley sat up in the darkness, still groaning.

"It would be hard to say where we are—and when," he gasped. "But we are where Berringer will never find us. I have broken our pledge, Po . . . to save our lives! He abandoned." When I saw that winged monstrosity of the void, it was im-

possible to go on! I never suspected myself a coward, Po. But that horror—"

Fortjay was rubbing his bruised forehead, dazedly.

"Still, he admitted, 'I can't remember—it's all like a nightmare! Tell me, Brad.'"

"Of course you remember," said Bradley. "But he wonders you think it a nightmare—it is one! But old Berringer's experiment—remember! He was going to prove that all knowledge is illusion. And Korth, his old rival, standing there with a skeptical smile on his hard mouth, waiting for his chance to make a fool of Berringer—"

"What! Fortjay's voice broke in, faint with dread. I remember . . . The terrible dark, when Berringer started his apparatus . . . The silence . . . The shaft beneath the vanishing planets . . . The fall down the shaft—let of space, Berringer said—"

Horror choked him for a time. His dry lips moved soundlessly, whispering again:

"The stars below . . . The facets of rock like a valley of jewels . . . The central sun beneath a world that no longer existed! . . . The Nine Beings, waiting for us to come to our doom . . ."

He jerked up his head, tried to recover himself.

"But that can't be!" His jaws opened. "Illusion of illusion. There are no stars!" He rubbed his forehead, blankly and looked into the darkness toward Bradley. "But I still don't understand why we are here."

"You have forgotten the nearer horror," said Bradley. "The monstrosity entity that guards the secret of the void. It pursued us through space on wings of glowing green. Its light was as fast as light! It may have been a thing of light." His voice was dry with horror. "Its eye was a triple wall of purple evil."

He shook his head, as if to shake

\* Beginning of Jack Williamson's installment.

off seat. Forjay grasped at his arm.

"Berringer will find us," he said apprehensively. "He gave our word to go with him to the end—even to certain doom at the end. He won't let us break it."

"No, we're safe enough from Berringer," said Bradley confidently. "It is a thing I got from the Wise Being. Time and space are neither are illusions. There is a mystery of illusion." We are ten thousand miles from Berringer, and ten million years—"

His voice was cut off by a sweep of panic. Far away in the starless darkness, he had heard the clatter of a stage. Presently, out of the black unknown, he saw a dark bulk approached. Its looming outlines became human, although it remained a monstrous thing.

"A man, Brad!" gasped Forjay. "Though his head's too big—"

"Once a man," the low, terrible voice came out of the dark. "But now my purpose makes me greater than a man." —

"Berringer!" cried Forjay in terror.

The grotesque huge head became a helmet as the man approached them.

"It is I. I have come to regard you of your pledge. You had the choice—you could have remained behind to reap fame and wealth from my discoveries. But you have chosen—to know and die.

"There can be no turning back. We are surely doomed. But if we go forward, we may know before we die what all men have failed to learn, since the first savage wondered at the alternation of day and night."

"But how?" gasped Bradley. "How did you follow?"

Berringer's motioned hand touched his strange helmet.

"This mechanism gives me contact with the Universal Mind, of which you are a part, and I see. I

know every thought of your conception—But we must go on. Our quest will lead far beyond the range of the Universal Mind. North has followed us with the ship."

The little spaceship grated on the rocks beside them. They fled aboard. Tall North was staring from the controls with frantic terror on his face.

"Berringer!" he gasped. "It has followed us, even here!"

His trembling hand pointed at a vision screen. There Forjay saw again the monstrous entity of the void, its glowing green wings rigidly extended against the dark of space.

"Drive back into space," ordered Berringer. "The monster is the smallest of the perils before us."

The ship dashed upward through splashing vertiginous darkness. Abruptly the stars returned. North, at the controls, greeted them with a mocking laugh.

"Dumb. There are no stars." He looked fearfully back at the screen.

"It is raining."

"Full acceleration," commanded Berringer grimly. "Away from the Earth."

The velocimeter needle crept swiftly upward. But suddenly alarm bells rang. White-faced, North scathed for the brake disk.

"Obstruction ahead. Inevitable! But we are close the ceiling—"

"Go on," said Berringer.

Still the needle crept upward. The powerful motor grew larger in the screen. North's staring eyes searched for the invisible barrier revealed by the detectors.

Young Forjay looked numbly at his chief.

"Ahead!" said Berringer. "Is the ethereal shell that surrounds the earth. The mirror that reflects the illusion of the stars. Head on. No stop—"

Crash! Forjay reeled from a stunning shock. All his body ached from a

searing instant of insupportable pain. He blinked, bewildered, at the vision screen.

"The barrier is gone," reported North, incredulously. "And the pursuing monster also—"

"The atoms of our body have rebounded from impact with the ethereal shell," said Berringer. "If you will observe yourself, you will discover that what was once your left hand is now your right. You will now require a mirror to read your characteristics—"

"But—" North stammered bewilderedly, "the monster—"

"We were reflected back against it," said the old man, the withered mask-like face beneath his helmet grim with invincible purpose. "Our combined speeds were far in excess of the velocity of light. Impossible, you may say. Illusion of the screen."

"But the entity has experienced the illusion of death."

"They were shaken, these four men to the cramped interior of the speeding little spaceship. Baddy shaken by what they had just seen in space, by the weird incredible phenomenon that had overturned the lifetime beliefs of at least three of them."

Berringer, this, shrivelled little man, whose aged body was husk of a colossal brain, was the least overwhelmed of them all. North, the tall, science scientist who had been on earth been Berringer's greatest rival and ally, here on his rapt face a disturbed bewilderment.

The two younger men, Bradley and Forjay, were looking helplessly toward Berringer. In their eyes was still horror of what they had just seen, and acute appeal for knowledge, for explanation.

"Now do you believe North?" Berringer was asking softly. "Now are

\* Beginning of Edmond Hamilton's "Illust."

you so sure that this quest is an utterly wild and useless quest?"

North tried to keep his voice steady. "I still see no reason for overturning all the accepted laws of human science," he said. "What we just experienced was incredible, unprecedented, it is true. But it does not mean that everything you have told us is true, that you are actually solving the supreme secret of the universe, storm the last citadel of the unknown."

"I can, and I will!" Berringer's voice rang with a super-human resolve. "For too great a time the scientists of earth have repeated peroxide. The final secrets are unknowable." I tell you that we are flying straight toward the core of the mystery of the cosmos. We are going to know all before we die!"

"Impossible," muttered North, his stout face pale. "I would give my life to achieve it, to penetrate the last supreme mysteries of time and space and matter. I have in fact abandoned my life in coming with you, simply to prove that theory of your's wrong. For it is—it must be."

Berringer motioned young Bradley to the controls of the ship. Then the aged little scientist stepped over to his tall colleague and looked up at him with burning eyes.

He said softly, "North, you don't believe, even after what we just went through, because you do not want to believe. You do not want to solve the mystery of the cosmos."

His hand flew up when North made as if to protest. "Don't deny it, North. I know your secret thoughts, and they are those of every other scientist: earth has had tolerance is a hard, perpetual track up down of the truth, and the lure of it for the scientist is the wild lure of the chase."

"All your life, North, you have been engaged in that chase, trailing truth amid forests of incomprehension."

able facts, seeking and seeking to ferret it out and always finding that it lies still further ahead. You have said, and have believed yourself, that you really wanted to break down and finally expose the ultimate secrets. But you have only said that because you thought such a thing impossible—in reality, you would hate such success because it would end your work, your thrilling hunt, forever! That is why you shrink from believing me, even now. You fear that your great chase of truth is coming to an end."

"It is not so," North declared steadily, though his eyes could not meet Berringer's. "The thrill of hunting truth is great, but I am not afraid to find the quarry. It is simply that our experience just now has not so strongly convinced me of the truth of what you say."

"Then convince yourself!" barked old Berringer. He motioned to the airlock of the space-ship. "Out on the walls of the ship still flicker the signs from the creature we met just now. Get some of that stuff and analyze it—see if it does not have dimensional strangeness, I say!"

North hesitated, looked almost apologetically toward Bradley and Forley. The two younger men were silent, staring, held by the spell of Berringer's personality.

"I will do it now," North said suddenly. "I am convinced that it will not prove what you say."

Heighly he donned a spacesuit and entered the air lock. Opening the outer door, and heaving inside the lock, he reached forth a gloved hand to escape from the wall of the ship some of the strangely glowing green slime which had coated it ever since their encounter with the monstrous entity of the void.

North re-entered the ship, and carefully deposited the slime in a leaden vessel at the little laboratory cubby. Slowly he took off his space-

suit, and then, without looking at the others, began a minute analysis of the stuff.

They saw his face growing paler and paler as he worked. His hands moved stiffly, his lips worked like those of a man in a dream. Of a sudden, the leaden vessel clattered to the floor. North had risen stupidly, was staring wildly at them.

"It—is it true?" he whispered, his eyes dilated as though he looked into ultimate horror. "The dimensional difference is the stems of that thing's body—it proves your theory, Berringer."

"Of course it proves it!" shrieked Berringer triumphantly. "You know now that what I said is so, that we are heading straight to the last secrets of the cosmos, and shall solve those secrets."

"Solve them?" whispered North. "No—we!"

He had made a sudden leap back toward the table. Bradley yelled. "Stop him!"

Forley leaped, but was too late. North had grasped the raygun in his hand and had turned it against his own breast. He sank, a suicide.

Berringer bowed down, almost unmoved, yet with a certain pity on his face.

"I knew he would do that," the old scientist said. "He could not stand the prospect of ending the hunt forever that has obsessed him all his life. He died, rather than finally attain the truth he has been seeking."

The old man turned to Forley. Silently they lifted North's body and thrust it into the airlock. A twist of the ship flung it clear into space, a moment or so later.

The ship fell on, toward the final secrets. Far back in space floated the body of the man who had died rather than witness the attainment of his ideal.

"Hijack, boys?" Yes! But still, just as definitely, no!"

Bradley and Forley both looked at old Berringer with impassive though intense interest. They felt that they knew him very well now, and yet they were aware they could never fathom all the dark and devious channels of his penetrating grasp.

There he sat before the controls of the space-ship, wild helmet on his head, his thin face thrummed and sweat-struck, his emaciated chest heaving with his labored breathing; but his eyes slight with the glow of cosmic truth. They had respected him before, though they had doubted some of his impossible theories; but now that doubt was vanishing fast.

"I'm sure you said I will listen patiently after what we've just seen, Doctor Berringer," said Bradley quietly.

"Good!" the aged scientist piped. "The whole universe is a paradox. Things are real that are not real—in a sense! I can give you a very simple analogy: Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry. One teaches that parallel lines never meet; the other claims that parallel lines do meet—at infinity. And both concepts are right!"

"But that is nothing. I have said many strange things before, and I say them again now. In one way the universe is a concrete thing, composed of atoms, planets and endless seas of empty ether. Real energy flows in it, real atoms and molecules compose the substance. In another way all this is illusion—the vast, ethereal dream of some mighty Mental Essence, of which we human beings are each tiny separate parts!"

"Back on earth I built a model that was a miniature model of the component parts of the cosmos. With it I could predict much of what the greater cosmos contains; for, by the

"Referring of Raymond E. Galbreath's Intelligence.

very nature of things, the pattern of the two must be the same. In it I saw the blue electrical creatures, who are nearer in nature to the Great All than anything that can be said to exist. In one sense I brought those creatures to birth in my experiment, in another sense I brought only their images, and in still another sense they did not and do not exist at all!"

"It seems beyond all sense and reason, Doctor," Forley muttered. "And yet—"

Berringer's cadaverous face was crossed by a fleeting grin of slight amusement. "Reason is sometimes a doubtful thing to stand on," he chuckled. "Look at those velocity meters. There is absolutely nothing wrong with their mechanism; their readings can be depended on to tell the truth! They register a speed of 147,000 miles per second. Yet repeated tests by trigonometry, equally reliable, show that we are not moving in space at all!"

"Then nothing is reliable! Nothing is predictable!" Bradley exclaimed.

"Quite the contrary," Berringer laughed. "I've told you that before. This helmet I am wearing gives me contact with the Mental Essence, and so I can read all the diverse branches of past, present, and future. You could not do this, for your minds lack the receptivity of mine. But if you could, you would clearly see how the factors of time, space, and energy combine to form the great cosmic pattern. Many, many dimensions are involved, and many, many things that are beyond description. From one angle all are the diverse parts of the intellect of the universe."

"And you are sure that we are doomed to this adventure?" Forley demanded.

"So I told you before we left," the ancient responded. "You knew the risks you faced, but you thought

we had a chance to survive, those you did not entirely believe me. We set out to probe the secrets, and we are doing it. The very core of things is being unfolded to us. We will die, but it does not matter, for we have really lived. Isn't it so, boys?"

Both of the younger men swallowed hard. They said they thought so. Both had put the thrills of adventure above the promise of long lives. That was why they had accompanied Berringer.

Berringer smirked mockingly. He glanced at a chronometer. "In two minutes all the stars will vanish," he predicted in the tone of a war. "A strange, airless, bitterly cold world will appear beneath us. We will land."

"And then what?" Portley questioned.

The sailor shrank. "You will see," he said.

Berringer was unruffled, but not his roving friends. Each second counted by the ticking of the chronometer was a longer eternity.

And then there was a dizzy falling, a momentary sensation of an impossible motion. The two minutes had passed, and the stars had vanished. Close beneath was an utterly rugged terrain, illuminated only by a faint bluish glow.

Coolly Berringer recalled the ship to a landing. Bradley and Portley donned space-suits.

"You will send those out there, boys. More than you would need them on the moon," said the scientist. "Remember what I told you about negative pressure?" Berringer grimaced knowingly.

"Yes," Bradley said without interest. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"It is part of the plan of things that I remain here," Berringer replied. "I have seen all there is to see, and I know that I am about the die in a strange way. Besides, the

radiations of my experiments have made me ill. There is no reason why I should stand myself during these last moments of existence. Good luck, boys!"

"Good luck, Doctor," they echoed, eager to see more of the unknown, making them abrupt.

They left the ship. They had advanced across the rough ground for perhaps two hundred yards when there was a mighty flash of electrical blue behind them. When they turned about, the ship was gone, dissolved by some invisible enemy.

Neither of them became outwardly excited. "Just like he said," Portley remarked, very low. "This planet, his smash—everything! Uncanny, dammit. Poor old Berringer!"

\* Portley relaxed into silence, then at a signal led from his companion they walked slowly and cautiously forward. It was, as they walked through the midst of the hard rocks, frozen with eternal cold of absolutely empty space, that they became aware of something. Nothing tangible—just something. A conviction of murky presences, invisible, hovering in that unbelievable temperature of absolute zero.

How long the situation lasted they had no idea, but presently it became so absolutely intolerant that they stopped and looked back towards the spot where their space ship had been standing.

"Remember, even though the ship's gone, I'd feel under where it was," Bradley murmured. "We're proving Berringer too accurately for my liking. Come on!"

He turned to move, then before he could do so, something colorfully invisible snatched him a tremendous blow that dropped him flat on the rocks. He looked up in dumb astonishment and beheld nothing, save his companion likewise sprawling.

\* Beginning of John Russell Fearn's "Impalement."

with all the wind knocked out of him.

They jumped to their feet again and made swift movements to tag the disintegrators from their belts, but before they could accomplish the feat the same unknown power held their arms rigidly to their sides. They were whirled off their feet and propelled through the airless space at tremendous speed, perhaps for a distance of two miles or more—it was difficult to determine in that vast terrain—then at last they beheld that which they dreaded to behold, the very thing instanced in the Berringer Experiment—a mine of gigantic dimension, sinking into bottomless profundity to the depths of this strange world. While it just visible to the eyes of the two as they were borne down the vast shaft, there loomed a faint blue spore of flame—the blue of electricity itself.

As they sank lower and lower the two hapless earth-men thought again of old Berringer; they could not help but do so. How deadly accurate his forecast had been; how he had been ridiculed for daring to say that there were no worlds or constellations in the sky at all! And that electricity experiment of his! And those strange occurrences on the way out here . . . The two earth-men now realized the vivid truth that had underlain it all.

Farther and farther they were borne into the depths, on the wings of the invisible, or rather, now the intense darkness prevailed; they could discern their capture as similar beings in those of the blue flame . . . Then there crept into the terrifying gloom a dim sense of light of sunlight, rapidly increasing.

Alighting at last, they beheld the source of light. Lying flat on rocks they surveyed a circular area of unguessable dimension.

Bradley sat up. Portley beside him. For the first time they look-

ed above them and from Portley came an exclamation of profound amazement. The stars had returned! Incredibly far distant lay the greenish globe of Earth, hung from this position they could distinctly see the sun, visible only by their looking over the cliff edge, was the exact center of everything, as well as being the source of light on this queer world.

Little by little they took it all in. The stars, the Earth—a free floating body in the strange concavity that was apparently empty space—and the day attendant moon. The stars had returned, yes, but the planets were still missing. And, ever more extraordinary, the stars only filled the space directly opposite to them.

Then at last the two came to face the strange fluorescent beings that surrounded them, beings that required neither air nor heat, who existed in that infinite cold of empty space upon this world . . . A world! The two earth-men pondered that, and as they did so they noticed how the light of the sun caught the myriad facets of the brightly glittering rock about them, turning them into a myriad haze of orange, green, sapphire and saffron.

Suddenly there came through the communication the higher leech of Bradley. He couldn't help himself. The beings came closer.

"Portley, if ever two guys from Earth got absolute proof of an earthly scientist's experiments, we have! He's breathing. Everything fits in exactly, just as he said it would. The rock facets, the central sun, the floating earth, the absence of stars at the top of this incomprehensibly deep shaft, and yet the presence of stars at the bottom of it! These blue beings, obviously born of electricity, existing under hardly any pressure. Berringer's experiment to the hilt! And to think we laughed at what he told us! Why, damn it man, if we took

off our space suits now we'd blow ourselves) existing under pressure common to Earth we're safe enough, too, otherwise . . ."

He stopped and faced his helmeted comrades grimly. They searched each other's eyes in the varicolored lights.

"We're doomed, Po" Brudler went on steadily. "We know that now. It's a one way passage—and according to Harringer that works not right, too. Remember 'his energy flow equations and what we saw back there in space. If only we could get back now, and prove that Harringer was right."

"And now?" Penjey asked quietly.

"Only this," Brudler answered steadily, and with that tapped a

sharp knife from its sheath upon his belt.

Before the Blue Beings had the slightest chance to interfere he had made a lightning movement and slashed both the space-suits of himself and his companion down the center. Instantly, even as Bradley had theorized, they burst asunder, deprived of the vast pressures common to their own world.

The Blue Beings surveyed the empty space where they had been, all unaware that a supreme ultimate riddle of infinity had been solved. Then they turned their backs to pursue their eternal movement in their multi-colored darkness that was their home.

The End.



Earl (Tando Binder) & Otto Binder



Jack Williamson



Edmund Hamilton



Raymond Z. Gallun

## The GREAT ILLUSION

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JACK WILLIAMSON, EDMOND  
HAMILTON, RAYMOND  
Z. GALLUN and JOHN  
RUSSELL FEARN

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John Russell Fearn